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WOMAN ON THE WITNESS-STAND

BY MARGARET PINCKNEY ALLEN

IN the early 'eighties, a certain Marie Bashkirtseff invited inspection of her soul. Up to that time the inmost recesses of the female soul were, like the female ankle, more a discreet and delightful suspicion than a stark reality. The little Bashkirtseff unlocked the doors and hung all her reactions, murky, tawdry, pathetic, futile, and inspiring out upon the line for a good airing.

Certainly the process must have been of enormous benefit to her. The ink-stained pages of the *Journal* made a channel into which the thwartings of circumstance, the inhibitions of character, the turgid emotionalism of the senses all found an outlet in surcease and publicity. And pioneer in this outspoken field, she cleared a path for other women to display frankly and without shame the processes of their hearts and minds.

But the 'eighties are a long, long time ago. Veritably an aeon in the life of woman. The general conception of her, even then, was that of a creature of emotion, a stranger to logic, sterile in the creative arts, incapable of any real concentration except in the rôle of mother. Her chief function from the man's point of view was to perform household tasks and furnish him at his need with the stimulus and the relaxation of the senses.

Since then women have gained several epochal rights; the right to vote; to reveal, without stopping traffic, the fact that they are bifurcated animals; to work side by side with men in war; to hold a job after marriage without disgrace to themselves or their husbands. In short, one had supposed that the air of the modern world gave such opportunity for full, deep breaths of freedom, for lives tuned to healthy interests and occupations, that they had passed forever away from their stifled selves, their morbid emotionalism.

Yet in this world of 1921, femininely dominated in all sorts of ways, woman takes the stand again and again and testifies.

And the frank, untrammelled outpourings of her spirit must make the shade of Marie Bashkirtseff long to get into touch with a Ouija board and explain herself further.

For she was behind our times in these particulars. She did have her reticencies. She did not claim to speak for all women. And she did have a very definite objective longing to work, to perfect herself in her talent, to attain to some expression of her personality through the arts and not through some intense emotional experience.

Let us take some recent instances. They must be recent probably to command attention, although there is continuity of evidence, if anyone demands it to show that the barriers have been down for some time and that the flood has been gaining in strength for a decade. Consider *Mary Olivier, Open the Door* by Catharine Carswell, *Woman* by Magdeleine Marx, *Kobiety*, (Women), by Rygier-Nalkowska, and the "Autobiography" of Margot Asquith. These are soul-studies, or soul-spasms, or soul-quests, as you prefer, of a distinguished order which insist on being taken seriously.

They disturb, they disquiet. For they all show an intensely emotional attitude toward life. Woman has for many generations endured both open and covert sneers that she is solely a creature of emotion and instinct. And openly and covertly she has blamed her fellow-creature, man, for it, because, said she, he liked those qualities in her, and she had developed them to please him. A specious plea. A weak defense, showing a dangerous pliability of character, a lack of personal ideal. Now we are getting at the truth, it seems, for of her own free will she is analyzing herself. She is all instinct and emotion. "An instinct that we find equally developed in the most refined inamorata with her deep emotions and in the average middle-class woman, all given up to passivity and routine."

She testifies further: "All women are at their heart's core exactly alike; during all their life they follow one thing alone and perish in pursuit of it." "You mean love?" I questioned. "Yes. That is the one thing. It is our fate; if not the first thing we pursue, it is always the last we give up. There is no help for it—none. Though we may be all our lives forcing upon

ourselves the conviction that we have the same rights as men and are capable of bearing the same amount of liberty as they."

Was this what the strange soul of Mary Olivier was seeking in the name of religion, of philosophy? Certainly there is no quiet in her, no sense of fulfillment until she found a lover. And with that experience to hold in memory life had apparently acquired a sufficiently satisfactory meaning. There is much the same quest in *Open the Door*. Joanna is intellectually lighter weight, she is not so neurotic as Mary Olivier, but much more erotic. She has the same torturing, exquisite sensitiveness to the physical world, but is a healthier animal both in body and mind. Yet they are all sisters apparently, these two moderns, and those remote genteel females who used to faint with sensibility in Jane Austen's time at the mere proximity of a male person.

The frank way in which Joanna and Mary tell you all about how they feel is now sufficiently the mode not to shock anyone, even the *jeune fille* who must, by the way, very soon be replaced by some other symbol of an organism capable of shock. One may wonder with some envy why one does not oneself pulsate, palpitate, tremble and soar with every sight and sound and smell of this varied world, why one does not feel with Janka that one "could fall upon the neck of the first man I met in the street."

Mary Olivier and Joanna are of course middle-class and therefore bound to be less haughtily "refined" in the expression of their egos. Yet here, arm in arm with them, comes Margot Asquith, a dame of high degree, in her own person on the stand to bear witness that all the outlets of a distinguished position, a happy marriage, an outdoor life and infinite distractions have no weight in the balance with the emotional absorption and satisfaction of her love-affairs. She did not have time for the sickliness of emotional introspection which a less crowded life affords. England and the great of England are, to her, only a blurred and faded tapestry background for the soul of Margot.

Yet these are all Anglo-Saxon women, of a race notoriously and notably awkward and reserved in its powers of expression, and withal still in the tradition that it's rather rotten form to show emotion. They are getting over it, that is clear. But

there is a long way to go to attain the skill and frankness in revelation of the more emotionally expressive races. With *Woman*, by a Frenchwoman, the self-revelation is tinged by a sort of unwillingness, as if possessed by a spirit beyond her control. And here too is heard, though very feebly, the longing to be freed from this suffocating preoccupation with sex, to be more a human comrade and friend of man.

The apotheosis, the distilled quintessence of emotionalism is reached however in *Kobiety*. This means "women" and the sub-title is "A Novel of Polish Life." In defence of Poland it should be hastily added that there is practically nothing of external life in the novel at all. It is all about souls. Women shed tears, tearing at their handkerchiefs with their teeth. In these busy days with so much necessary work lying around and nobody to do it, that seems like wasted energy. A wife and mother with a somewhat discursive husband discourses thus: "Looked at through the spasm of Pain," she continued, "the sun itself is black, the most superb flowers in the Red Garden turn to tongues of flame, and the cistern filled with flowers of bliss changes into an infinite, infinite ocean of blood."

Of course Zola and de Maupassant went off like that in their more unbridled moments. But women seem to keep at it longer. The Martha quoted above might be described as a complex of complexes, with complicating subsidiary obsessions, one of the most painful pathological studies in literature, painful to realize, most painful in the realism of the description of her emotional states. Janka herself who tells the story, or rather, describes the feelings of the book, is a less concentrated example of the erotomaniac than Martha or the strange and morbid Gina. But existence for her too is a search for someone to love her. Her love-experiences are like ill-assorted, defective pearls strung along the string of her days. Even in her so-called discussions of philosophy, which she evidently feels are very high-class, she never gets away from herself, her ego and its hunger. Her work in life is that of an accountant in an office. It is to be hoped that her demeanor was fairly restrained during office-hours, because out of them she was indeed a creature of feeling. She has "fevered lips," "an ice-cold heart," "a brain on fire

with excitement," and "eyebrows and lids twitching as if agitated by some witch's spell."

One might go on with examples like this forever. Janka very nearly does. She spares us not one sensation. It is like being in Heaven seeing the fulfillment of the prophecy that the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed. She makes the former literary masters of these secrets of the hearts of women look like bungling, dilettante vivisectionists. One asks bewildered questions. Is it true then that women live only for their moment, brief or long, of love? Is the soul only a function of the body? Is all this monstrous egotism, vibrant and greedy beneath its concealing veils of so many different textures only "a case of design in nature," as Schopenhauer says? Is some such canticle as this the authoritative utterance of the soul of woman:

Oh, how I love myself in all my manifestations! In all my loves and abhorrences; in all my dreamings and scornings; in all those most mournful victories of my own unconquerable strength!

If it is a really representative voice, a League for the Anti-Feminization of the World should be started to-morrow.

It is difficult to recall in masculine self-revelation anything even remotely approaching these maunderings. Amiel was fearfully and wonderfully interested in himself; Barbellion, in these later days, put himself under the microscope of analysis. But these are isolated instances, sick men and sick souls. No one thinks either of them is speaking for men as men. And for all the crassness of their egotism, it is entirely free from perfervid emotionalism or any hint of eroticism.

Where man has testified against woman, one only half believes him. But when woman insists on taking the stand against herself, one is forced to believe. Must the final classification be the Fallen, the Forsaken, and the Frustrated? It would seem so.

But with one paragraph there can be entire agreement. "Owinski, looking down the long vista of the street, took not the slightest interest in what she was saying. Gina became silent; it may be that a feeling of shame had come upon her."

MARGARET PINCKNEY ALLEN.